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History education in transition – transcultural dialogue on historical thinking, learning, and culture

Editorial

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Historical thinking and the teaching of history in times of transition and in times of crisis

We are living in a time of change and instability. This raises the question of how history education can respond and what theories, goals, values, and learning objectives should guide future directions. Global challenges such as the Corona pandemic, wars in different parts of the world, migration and the emerging consequences of climate change seem to make international cooperation and dialogue more necessary than ever. The digital age of interconnected communication channels provides scholars, teachers, and students with access to a variety of narratives and discourses across national borders. Access to knowledge, at least at first glance, has never been easier. This brings many benefits, but also many challenges. For example, better connectivity does not automatically translate into better information. On the contrary, it has been shown that not only learners but also experts have difficulties in recognizing the fullness of information (McGrew et al 2018). And in terms of history education: the processing of the most diverse theoretical approaches and empirical information does not necessarily contribute to the clarification of pedagogical questions that arises in a specific classroom context. But of course, despite the challenges, academic exchange benefits greatly from the expansion of international networks. In the face of a global, networked community, the international exchange of ideas, theories and concepts, as well as empirical findings about the teaching of history, has intensified over the past thirty years. Concepts such as historical thinking, historical reasoning, historical literacy, historical competencies, and historical consciousness have become standard in the theory and practice of history education in Western Europe and North America (Berg & Christou, 2020; Harris & Metzger, 2018). However, the primacy of a Western perspective on history and historical culture and its influence in formal and non-formal educational settings must also be critically examined. Are there universal mechanisms of historical thinking? Do the same demands apply everywhere to the concrete operations of historical thinking and learning (Rüsen

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2008; Rüsen 2012; Körber 2024)? Do we experience an equal construction of knowledge, or do the economically and politically strong regions of the global North set the standards for what can be understood as "plausible" historical knowledge or desirable competencies (Wilschut 2019; Brett & Guyver 2021)? Finally, in pluralistic societies, people's needs for history and the opportunities it provides to explore and reflect on the past, interpret the present, and shape the future have become more diverse. Consequently, questions such as "What is history?" and "What stories should be passed on to the younger generation?" are by no means trivial.

Challenges of teaching and learning history today in the context of scholarship, education, and public history

The challenges are at least partly due to developments in historical scholarship, which we will briefly outline here in three points. Firstly, history has never been the only epistemic authority producing historical knowledge for society, but its influence on commonly accepted narratives has recently declined. On the contrary, a growing number of actors in the culture of remembrance and public historiography, such as media professionals, filmmakers, authors, museum curators, and engaged citizens, etc., are contributing to new perspectives and a new understanding of history. It is worth noting the boom of museums, exhibitions and commemorations in many places around the world, as well as the widespread introduction of historical themes into the audiovisual media, which undoubtedly address new questions or bring newer historiographical insights to a broader audience. However, the new interest in history could also be viewed critically as an obsession with the past that exploits the market value of history and obscures rather than illuminates historical knowledge (Rousso 1998). Thus, historiographical narratives and scientific knowledge do not have a monopoly on the interpretation of history; rather, they are perceived as possible perspectives with their underlying values and norms (Ammert et al., 2017), which in turn are bound to time, space, political and social power relations, and public debates. In parallel with these developments, scholars have become more conservative in their consideration of grand themes. Many historians work in specialized areas of research fields that contribute to very specific questions, while abandoning the need to provide answers to overarching questions. Moreover, reflections on intercultural or transcultural programmes thus take on a new relevance for practical work in school and extracurricular history education institutions (Nordgren & Johansson 2014).

Secondly, a "moral turn" in historiography can be observed more recently in the sense that "historians have sought to use questions of justice, injustice, and right and wrong as guiding categories in their work" (Gibson et al. p. 50; see also Barton & Ho 2022). Such examples are easy to find, e.g. in the reappraisal of the forced care measures taken by state authorities in Switzerland, in the residential schools in Canada, in the postcolonial reflection on the past in many countries, and so on. However, the negotiations are often in full swing here, so that historians become advocates for the victims and historical research inevitably involves a political point of view. This leads to the question: What is the overall aim of learning history? Is it to learn formal thinking skills? Or is it about larger social issues, such as embedding the teaching of history in social challenges and contributing to the common good? In fact, these references to the common good and the importance of historical learning for social cohesion have recently been found on a theoretical and normative level (e.g. Assmann & Assmann 2024). However, the educational practice often still follows mechanistic principles based on traditional forms of teaching that focus on the acquisition of established knowledge (Barton & Levstik 2004).

Thirdly, with regard to non-Western and indigenous cultures, the question arises as to whether Western concepts and intellectual traditions are suitable as a starting point for establishing universal concepts of learning history. Several scholars critically note that concepts of historical thinking are rooted in Western traditions of Enlightenment philosophical thought, and thus presuppose a certain concept of knowledge and specific methods for producing and evaluating that knowledge. Levesque and Clark (2018), for example, ask whether it is possible to understand other ways of dealing with the past against this background. The explicit or implicit normalization of a Westernized philosophical framework for defining what knowledge is and the ethical codes associated with it can also be seen as another example of the continuation of colonial structures with their own forms of temporal orientation, perspectives on the relationship

between past, present and future, and standards and methods for evaluating knowledge claims, ethical decisions and actions. The hitherto dominant focus on Western knowledge production has recently been increasingly questioned in the face of global crises, as this knowledge - from a planetary perspective - is held responsible for many crises in the first place. It is therefore more important than ever to bring together diverse knowledge practices. Keith Barton and Li-Ching Ho, for example, seek to combine Western thought with various philosophical and cultural traditions, including Confucianism and indigenous philosophies, to create space for a vision of global education that supports students in their quest for social justice and harmony, while recognizing the diversity of crises and the need for collective action. They reconsider the "why of learning history" with a clear plea for the normative level, according to which civic engagement and ethical and moral behavior must be the goal of teaching social sciences and humanities, including history:

> Beyond the vague goal of preparing young people for public participation, social and civic educators show little agreement on what students should be learning or what it means to take part in public life. [...] We should make it clear at the outset, however, that by public action we mean collective engagement with matters of public concern. This involves acting to improve the world by addressing poverty, violence, discrimination, and other societal issues, or working to preserve important elements of the world we already have, such as In-digenous languages or the environment. (Barton & Ho 2022, 2–3)

However, this demand does not clarify how a common agreement on norms and ethical standards could be achieved, or to what extent deliberative processes and liberal-democratic values should guide the discourse.

Alongside these considerations, the challenges facing the teaching of history in migration societies, such as the question of which content, approaches and learning objectives should be chosen, are becoming increasingly pressing. There sometimes seems to be a wide gap between the history that is taught and debated in academia, in the public sphere, and the history classrooms. Or, to put it more pointedly, schools can be seen as "complex sites of historical consciousness and historical learning where public expectations of what is important to learn, memory practices, personal narratives and the historical discipline all collide" (Gibson et al. 2022, p. 49). Teachers are increasingly required to diagnose their students' prior knowledge and historical consciousness, and to further develop and classify their own knowledge in the context of current debates and discourses. Thus, the expectation to not only impart knowledge, but also to stimulate historical thinking, and in particular to foster historical orientation and ethical judgment in the classroom is overwhelming for many educators. Not only have heterogeneous student populations and increasingly polarized public debates made these tasks more challenging, but so have the demands for self-reflective historical awareness. As a result, discussing controversial issues becomes difficult. Only recently, there have been increasing calls for teachers to initiate the development of discursive skills, discussions about collective belongings, and historical understandings of interwoven structures, worldviews, and institutions in the classroom in order to strengthen the promotion of civic engagement and the democratic development of peoples (Barton & Levstik 2004; Carretero & Perez-Manjarrez, 2019). This is a call that should be addressed not only to students and teachers, but probably to all those who deal with history.

The need for transcultural dialogue

In the light of the global, epistemological, moral and social challenges outlined above and the notion of transition, we propose to strengthen a transcultural academic dialogue on concepts of historical thinking and history education embedded in different educational contexts, linked to state policies, societal values and norms. Deliberative dialogue, social justice, inclusion and agency can serve as starting points for new theoretical developments and practical approaches. Considering current challenges, it is important to consider whether established approaches such as inter- and multiculturalism should be complemented by a transcultural perspective. Andreas Körber describes transculturality as a concept that goes beyond the traditional notions of multiculturalism and interculturality (Körber 2018). It sees cultures not as homogeneous and separate entities, but as mental complexes to which people refer when they conceptualise their identities in the multidimensional space of shared and divisive differences. Culture is understood as

a complex and multifactorial construct that connects rather than separates individuals from different groups. The goal is to create cultural connections across cultural boundaries, thereby reducing diversity and otherness without eliminating them altogether. Transcultural history education would therefore be challenged to understand and teach the complexity of cultural interdependence, with teachers and students reflecting on their own cultural interconnectedness. The goal would then be to develop openness to the perspectives of others, to learn to appreciate different forms of knowledge, and to develop an enduring willingness to talk about history. From a social constructivist perspective which also draws on the work of collectivist cultures (Vygotsky 1978), we argue here that basic narratives and ways of thinking, as well as methods for gaining new insights into the past, should be learned through interactional exchange in order to be able to ask further questions on a well-founded and, wherever possible, deliberatively negotiated knowledge base. Only those who have structures of historical thinking at their disposal can expand, question, reflect, criticize and rethink them. It goes without saying that such structures are not only based on language and textual work but can also include a wide range of human forms of expression, including visual representation, symbolic action and artistic expression, all of which have long traditions of mixing and blending leading to entanglement, intermixing, and commonality (Welsch, 1999), e.g., the history of architecture or the world of music, dance, or technological artifacts such as films, digital games or AI-generated images.

Aims of the new journal Historical Thinking, Culture, and Education (HTCE)

With the new journal Historical Thinking, Culture, and Education (HTCE), we aim to provide a critical space for reflection and exchange on the above-mentioned aspects. For the first issue, we were looking for theoretical and empirical publications that contribute to a transcultural and transnational dialogue on the current state of history education and its needs for future developments. On the academic side, the hope is to broaden perspectives and find solutions to emerging political and societal problems. Our goal is to support the development of theory and the expansion of research towards a more comprehensive understanding of the preconditions, contexts, and processes of historical thinking and learning around the globe. Related to this is the hope that translation and scholarly dialog, combined with a heightened awareness of power relations and hierarchies, can lead to mutual understanding and the resolution of tensions. Interdisciplinary research practices with their characteristic “work on transitions”, their “readiness for translation” and “logic of transition” (e.g., gender studies, postcolonial studies, global citizenship education) can offer starting points. Academic discourse is often dominated by those with high economic or social resources. These are usually scholars from the “Western” world. As a result, relevant perspectives are lost or not even noticed. Therefore, we especially encourage scholars from non-Western backgrounds to submit papers and contribute to the discussion.

The first issue of the HTCE journal contains a collection of research articles, and miniature papers designed to stimulate an international dialogue among scholars and educators in the field of history education.

Research papers

Continuing post-colonial debates, *Andrea Brait* presents an analysis of Austrian textbooks on discovery, imperialism, and colonialism. The article examines Austrian curricula and 61 textbooks from the Second Republic since 1945, focusing on how they present the consequences of European colonial policies. The state requirements are clearly Eurocentric, but the textbooks have considerable freedom in the selection of thematic aspects. This freedom allowed for the inclusion of topics that were not explicitly mandated, such as the impact of European conquests on indigenous populations. However, it was also found that the long-term consequences of colonialism were often omitted, and racist concepts persisted in textbooks well into the 2000s, influencing contemporary social discourse in Austria.

Kyriaki Fardi’s study explores the perspectives and beliefs of prospective and currently employed educators on the appropriate age for introducing children to history education in kindergarten and primary school. Using thematic analysis, the qualitative research reveals

that educators' views are influenced by their social representations of history education, as well as their own educational experiences. These factors shape their perceptions of the appropriate age for introducing history to children. The paper outlines the theoretical background, research objectives, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusions.

The study by *Katharina Totter*, *Wolfgang Wagner*, and *Christiane Bertram's* study examines the standardized assessment of historical competencies in German history classes. They developed a test to measure epistemological understanding and methodological skills and validated it with 354 students before administring a revised version to 1,301 high school students. The final test contained 38 items with different stimuli such as interview excerpts and cartoons. While the methodological test showed sufficient reliability, the epistemological test had limitations, indicating a need for revision. The study also found that students' grades, cognitive ability, and socioeconomic status predicted their performance.

Miniatures

Several authors have decided to write a short article. The miniatures are between 1,000 and 5,000 words in length and are designed to stimulate discussions about history education in a broad sense. They include suggestions and ideas for pedagogical innovations, new theoretical concepts, cross-cultural research, interdisciplinary approaches, etc.

Helen Kaufmann and *Thomas Metzger's* article, "Crossing Borders in History Education," is based on an international summer school in Prague and St. Gallen, part of the "Train to Freedom" project of the Pädagogische Hochschule St. Gallen and Charles University in Prague. Student teachers and teacher trainees developed didactic concepts and materials for a virtual tour (IWalk) based on the life of the Holocaust survivor Petr Fiala, who was among the 1,200 prisoners on the "Train to Freedom" to Switzerland in February 1945. The article analyzes audio recordings of participants' discussions about their own history education and didactic approaches, and links these reflections to research findings and theoretical concepts in history education.

Alison Bedford and Naomi Barnes provoke reflection on how and why different perspectives are taught in history classrooms across nations, and their relationship to citizenship in liberal democracies. Using initial survey data from Australian history teachers, they highlight the inconsistent understanding of the concept of perspective. They emphasize the urgent need to focus on multiple perspectives, especially as right-wing conservatism seeks to promote a monovocal grand narrative, reverting to a 'victor's history' approach that undermines multicultural, democratic societies.

The term "Anthropocene" is widely discussed today, not only in scientific circles but also in the media, popular culture, and the arts. It is discussed as a turning point in Earth history, a geological epoch, and a cultural metaphor. However, as *Andreas Hübner* points out, some scholars argue that the term reinforces anthropocentrism, Eurocentrism, and global inequalities and contributes to depoliticization. This discussion will explore how the Anthropocene is supposedly depoliticized. The author argues that a critical examination of temporality and timescales can reveal the politics of the Anthropocene, promote new historical thinking, and challenge the foundations of history education.

Lili Zeng asks about the perspectives and contexts of historical learning in historical games. Traditional concepts of history framed within linear narratives are currently facing significant challenges and are being largely replaced by digital media. Historical games offer significant pedagogical potential by addressing the limitations of traditional history education through experimental learning. Their value lies in open-ended storytelling, self-directed exploration, immersive personal experiences, and the ability to contextualize historical events through interactions with virtual avatars.

Interviews

Finally: We want to be a scholarly journal. At the same time, we want to move away from established paths and offer more open formats for knowledge transfer. Most people from an academic context are probably aware that many conversations in the informal times of conferences, for instance, open up a high degree of knowledge transfer. Therefore, in addition to traditional papers, we want to give space to experimental settings and informal forms of knowledge exchange. In this first issue, Sebastian Barsch interviewed Kenneth Nordgren, Carmen Gloria Zúñiga and Johannes Meyer-Hamme, who were presenters in the first HTCE lecture series on the question "Is there something that connects the diversity of historical narratives?". They all

provide an overview of their experiences with transculturality, travel knowledge, and history education from their respective regional perspectives. Overall, we are excited to see how research and dialogue on historical thinking in formal and non-formal contexts will develop. We hope that the new open access journal will provide a positive impetus for disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourse.

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